

Daily Whale

Q+A with Tom Tresser of CivicLab

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Tom Tresser moved to Chicago to become an actor and he ended up an activist.

This year – after working on a range of efforts, from opposing Chicago’s 2016 Summer Olympic bid to advocating for National Endowment of the Arts funding – Tresser started his own advocacy group: the CivicLab. The organization was created to foster citizen engagement by helping citizens become better informed. To that end, Tresser’s CivicLab has focused on its “The TIF Illumination Project,” which aims to bring greater transparency to the city’s Tax Increment Financing program.

A [tool](#) that city officials use to siphon property tax money in designated districts for economic development projects, TIFs are a flashpoint of controversy for unions as well as some left-wing and government watchdog groups.

The Daily Whale recently sat down with Tresser in the CivicLab’s West Loop office to talk TIFs, his introduction to political activism and the future of the CivicLab.

DW: When did the TIF Illumination Project start, and how has it evolved?

TT: We started planning the project in the middle of 2012. We gathered our data last year and tried to figure out the best way to show the data.

We then gave a presentation about TIFs in [Alderman Walter Burnett’s] 27th Ward, which is where we are located. I presented a map that shows how much money we believe the TIF took just from inside the ward boundaries, and then how much money was left in the TIF accounts from this ward at the beginning of the calendar year. This was never reported before.

I also showed the projects funded by TIFs, showing which were public versus private projects, which were for-profit versus nonprofit.

So there was a lot of work to get to this, and volunteers did it all.

DW: Have you done this for every ward?

TT: No, we've done it for 18 wards. The attendees of this meeting at the Chopin Theatre were invited to go back to their communities and organize their own meetings. We would then come to those meetings and produce a similar kind of map. Each meeting was separately organized by different groups of people, who were volunteers. They did their own turn out, did their own flyers and raised their own money.

That happened starting March 6 and went straight through October. I've never seen anything like it. Citizens were organizing meetings throughout the city.

[The TIF Illumination Project] is doing research and explaining about civic finance in a way that should have been done by your alderman, should have been done by the budget department, should have been done by the Chicago Community Trust – should have been done by somebody. It's important when citizens feel that we need to get muscular about democracy, and it's not a spectator sport. You got to jump in the game, and in order to do that, you need to be smart.

Unfortunately, in this city, knowing stuff is pretty hard because information is hard to get.

DW: Assuming you are right that information is hard to get, why do you think that is?

TT: TIFs are a half-billion dollars that the mayor has at his disposal, so the political spoils are enormous. [*Ed. note:* according to the Cook County Clerk's annual [TIF report](#), the city generated \$457 million in total revenue from 163 TIF districts in 2012.] If you can control how this is spent at your discretion, why would you want people to know about it?

DW: It seems like you are talking about two separate issues. One is transparency: Whether we know enough about TIFs. The second is the merits of the TIF program. Maybe you cannot disentangle the two, but – transparency aside – do you think the TIF program has the ability to deliver economic development to blighted neighborhoods, as intended?

TT: No, I don't. It's clout-driven. Giving money to companies to do what you are supposed to do anyway is a horrible idea. It's a race to the bottom.

The fundamental premise is: "What's the smartest way to get a world class city?" Is it to give corporations public money or is it to have the smartest kids graduate in America? Something that we know is that if you can keep a kid in high school, his lifetime wages are increased by \$400,000.

DW: But Emanuel and [Chicago Public Schools CEO Barbara] Byrd-Bennett have drawn attention to the fact that the high school graduation rate keeps rising. They have [put out statistics](#) that the current 63 percent is the highest since 1999.

TT: We might be doing better than we were, but we're going in the wrong direction. They're closing schools when what we need to focus on is class size and highly-qualified teachers.

DW: Quickly back to the issue of transparency. Reputation for corruption aside, is Chicago really worse than other cities in terms of having information about its government available for citizens?

TT: I know that all of Illinois gets a "B-" for its entire information.

[*Ed. note:* The Illinois Public Interest Research Group, with the assistance of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, issued a March 2012 [report](#) in which Illinois received a "B-" for transparency, ranking the state at No. 18 nationally. However, the group's March 2013 [report](#) gave Illinois an "A-".]

To me, though, transparency in Chicago means watching grainy security footage of a gas station robbery where you can see the perp with a gun, but his face is fuzzy. You know there is a crime – you can clearly see it, but it is too late. That's what transparency is here. There is very little opportunity to intercede before the crime is committed.

DW: After these ward-by-ward meetings, what is the next step of the TIF Illumination Project?

TT: We have no staff so we can't really follow up with dozens and dozens of organizers. But independently they have done multiple things. In some cases, the people have started their own book club and started reading on their own about economic development. Another group of people wanted to walk the wards and [rate](#) the wards on a number of measures like schools and parks. In another community, they started a search to look for a new alderman.

DW: What community was that?

TT: [Alderman Anthony Beale's] 9th Ward. They are creating their own job description and interviewing people.

DW: When did you first move to Chicago?

TT: I have lived in Chicago since 1980. ... I have spent the last 14 years in Lincoln Park, where my wife and I live.

I came here originally to be a Shakespearean actor following the Illinois Shakespeare festival downstate. I started the Free Shakespeare Company in what is now Piper's Alley. There used to be an old movie theater in there called the Aardvark and Second City gave that to us. ... We shared that with another little theater company.

So we constructed a 90-seat little space there, and we did Shakespeare and we performed contemporary plays. I became managing director, and I taught myself public administration and grant writing.

I then went to Pegasus Players in April of 1985, and spent five years there producing about 30 shows.

We innovated [at Pegasus Players]. We were one of the first theaters to computerize. We had an HMO for our staff and actors in 1986. We did co-productions [*Ed. note:* having multiple plays running at once] there before they were really commonplace.

DW: How did you first get involved in political activism?

TT: I was theater manager at Pegasus. In the summer of 1990 at the retreat for the League of Chicago Theatres, we were given a briefing on the [funding] status for the National Endowment for the Arts, which was coming up for reauthorization. It was under attack, even though it had something like \$150 million in [yearly] funding – a pathetic rounding error in the [federal] budget.

I was like, "Who is coming after the NEA? What is Focus on the Family?" There was a firestorm of hatred unleashed against a few of these [NEA-funded artists such as [Robert Mapplethorpe](#)] that was truly staggering. These fundamentalist Christians had ... direct mail operations. They had broadcast outlets, physical buildings, churches. They put all that at the disposal of a political armature to get people elected to public office.

I ran around the country in 1992, 1994, 1995 going to arts organizations, national conferences ... telling people who [the Christian Coalition] was and why they were successful. I showed slides to crowds of art managers and arts leaders, and they're saying, "Well, what do you want us to do about it?"

I want you to organize. They got a playbook. What's our playbook? They're going by the Bible, shouldn't we go by the 1st amendment? Shouldn't that be our playbook?

DW: Was that successful?

TT: I was unsuccessful at getting America's arts community to be political. People that run America's large art institutions tend ... to be conservative in their thinking. They mostly thought I was nuts.

DW: Your group "No Games Chicago" was successful in opposing the city's 2016 Summer Olympic bid. Talk about your organizing around that.

TT: We were the only people that spoke out. From my first public forum in January 2009 to when the Olympic bid was decided Oct. 2, we were the only public voice of opposition. So whenever there was a story we were the only place to go.

We took our campaign to Switzerland. [*Ed. note: Switzerland is home of the International Olympic Committee, which deliberated over which of the four finalist cities would receive the 2016 games.*] We basically told them, “Look, this is the wrong project for the wrong city at the wrong time. With Chicago, it’s going to be embarrassing. Chicago is broke. Chicago is corrupt. It’s entirely possible that the people we’re dealing with now will be in prison years from today.”

We also started looking at TIF then because the city said it was broke, but in the summer of 2009 had \$1.4 billion lying around in TIF accounts.

DW: Besides TIF Illumination, what else is the CivicLab is currently working on?

TT: We’ve also got a citizen science project going where it involves using a big balloon filled with helium that’s lofted up a couple of hundred of feet with a camera that’s tricked up to take infrared images so that you can actually not just map an area but stitch the digital images together. [This is] so you can see the terrain and actually detect pollution. So this is an example of a citizen science project – a kind of do-it-yourself democracy.

DW: What else do you do right now besides the CivicLab?

TT: I teach quite a few classes. I am at the end of teaching an online class for Loyola for 40 students – introduction to nonprofit management for their graduate school in social work. But I just finished a five-week class for UIC aimed at working as managers of nonprofits.

DW: What does the future hold for the CivicLab?

TT: Our hope is that in three or four months we’re on track to break even, and God willing, if the creek doesn’t rise, we will get grants and pay ourselves.

We want to make this a real community space for people who want to make the world a better place.